Abstract: Freshman student describes their experience of (non)belonging and dissatisfaction at Middlebury in general and in Middlebury organizing spaces pre-encampment, and the ways the encampment felt like a spatial and temporal break from such dissatisfactions. Also discussed are organizing structures within the encampment, the encampment's genesis, the valuable relationships that came out of the encampment for this individual, workshops led, the voracity of demand-making within an institution like Middlebury, students willingness to act and get involved when a project – or protest – is made available to them, benefits and drawbacks of opening up the encampment to varying commitment levels, and the collective excitement and immersion of the project.

Q: You did organizing in high school. When you got to Middlebury, did you plan to keep doing this? What did you make of the organizing culture?

A: I intended to do organizing at Middlebury… And I joined SJP and started going. And it was very educational, and not fully what I was looking for. There was one conversation actually, where I was expressing my thoughts or frustrations. And I had stopped showing up regularly because I didn't feel like I was bringing much to the space, or like it was a space that was doing that much. I also went to SNEG for a few meetings when I got to campus but I was like 'this also isn't the space I'm looking for,' so I stopped showing up.

Q: What was that car conversation like? How did it go from feeling like it wasn't happening to like it was?

A: Probably I said something about how we should be doing things that feel more collective, and based more on getting a sense of what people are interested in doing and supporting them to do that, as opposed to something more top-down and educational, where people running it feel this need like 'What are we gonna do to fill our meetings?" and people aren't showing up. Probably it was the broader critique I hold today of the issues of top-down almost non-profit style organizing. Because I think it's more effective not to organize other people, but to organize us as a collective, like 'what are we trying to do for ourselves?

Q: Right. And how did you get from here to involved with the encampment?

A: There was an SJP meeting where someone mentioned another group chat to join if you're interested in helping with certain things. It was unclear. But through that, I learned about planning meetings for the encampment. The first one I went to was in the Weybridge exploratorium. We had a long one in the Mitchell Green Lounge. They were these late night, supposedly secretive meetings in the week leading up to it. They started from the idea: Okay, we should have an encampment. Then it was working out details: okay, we should have demands. What do those demands look like? A big debate was where should we put the encampment? The lawn by Mccolough? The "Proc Triangle?". Then we were making a packing list, preparing the call to action announcement.

Once we started the encampment it was very chill, but leading up to it there was much more uncertainty about how the college would respond. I personally felt both very cool and excited, like 'Oh I'm in these meetings– I'm so new here – but also sort of less sure of myself. I know these people less well, I know this space less well, I'm already in this select group of people who are making the encampment happen?

Q: How many people were in those original meetings?

A: 20.

Q: How did you feel in that planning space? Comfortable? A sense of belonging?

A: There was a sense of belonging. And a sense of excitement. In the week leading up, it was sort of all I wanted to think about. It brought back life into me in a certain way. I don't remember the specifics of how I was doing [before], but it was sort of isolating and overwhelming and stressful, starting overall last year. So it was really exciting. The planning was the thing I wanted to think about. Not classes! It was like 'this is something that's real. Finally.'

I can't remember how many people I knew or not in that time, because now I feel like I know so many people so well, or well enough to be comfortable in that space. But in hindsight,

Q: You felt like you had shared purpose and goals with these people, so this started mattering more. Had you felt connections with people before at school?

A: My general memory [of before] is being overwhelmed with navigating time and work and not feeling… I had people I'd do *things* with, but I felt fairly… alone, in a certain way. You asked about shared purpose.

I know I have some crazy journal entries from when I started [at Middlebury] about like 'what is going on, what's happening'

Q: You said planning meetings were intense, and the encampment was "chill." Could you say more about this?

A: When we were looking over the guidelines on protest and expression, someone made the argument that the encampment doesn't violate anything, which was true. But also at the same time there was the news from so many other colleges having encampments and a lot of them being shut down, or having different levels of intensity or repression.

Also, I initially wasn't planning on being one of the people camping. I was like, 'Would all those people get academic citations?' And my parents would be super upset if I got disciplinary action, but thereafter the first night I was like 'oh, this is pretty chill,' and that's when I started camping at the encampment.

Q: What do you remember feeling at the encampment?

A: A lot of community. It felt like a space that was totally different from the rest of the college, which was so nice. It was really nice.

Q: Different in what way?

A: It's so obvious, but it’s hard to put words to. I’m remembering the physical space, the space it took up on the green, walking through the tents, the main tent that we had… the infrastructure slowly got built up, of course. It was also sunny, which is crazy. It felt interesting and meaningful and community, and there were always people out, different conversations happening, different planning happening.

Q: Do you have any vignette memories?

A: A few things I remember are the Sunday morning when we were putting up the tents in the rain, and then we put up the tents and then we’re like ‘okay, I guess we have these tents now!’

I remember the structure we had of general assemblies of morning and night, reports back from the different committees.

I remember I was suggested to be one of the negotiator liaisons with admin and being really conflicted about that. That must’ve been Monday afternoon. Under one of the tall fir trees closer to the old chapel rd that conversation happened.

Q: Were you wearing shoes most of the time?

A: No, I was barefoot. It was awesome. I was barefoot the whole time.

Q: Do you still feel connected to that spot on campus?

A: Not anymore. Or… I guess I haven't thought about it., but I just walk there. I never stop. I haven’t had a reason to spend any time there since… Well, after the encampment got taken down we had this big meeting where the encampment used to be, and since that moment I haven't really spent any time in that spot except walking by it in a rush.

Q: What groups were you in?

A: The structure had a lot of room for improvement. The groups were shifting regularly, but I remember helping out with art, with scheduling workshops. I led a workshop. There were different signal planning chats, but the groupchat of us who originally put up the tents lingered on as one of the main strategizing/decision-making bodies, so I was also pretty present in that space. That’s where I spent the most time: in decision-making and strategy conversations which took so long.

Q: What workshop did you lead?

A: It was generally about police exchanges between the U.S. and Israel, specifically including the “GILEE” (Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange) which was between Atlanta Police Department Officers and people in the IOF (Israeli Occupying Forces). But also it was sort of a broader conversation around … well, I don’t actually remember. Maybe it was about responding to police violence, and the role of Israel and the militarization of American Police forces and that relationship.

And I was going to lead another one about campaign strategies and basics, but I didn't because of scheduling.

And also after the encampment was taken down I led a workshop facilitating reflection. It went alright. After the encampment got taken down there was a week, there was this silly time for giving flowers to the board of trustees. But then we had some day-of workshops where we put up some tents in the Proc Triangle [for the day] but then Derek Doucet (Dean of Students) came and we were like ‘you can’t do that,’ and we were like ‘yeah.’

That whole time, the vibes were off.

Q: What did it feel like when the vibes were on? What were ‘the vibes’?

A: That’s a great question. So many different workshops happening, and the one part of the encampment that was closer to the chapel, next to the big canopy we had in the middle – spending time just being available to help with different things, a bunch of snacks there, people sitting in different chairs, workshops going on and people painting signs and banners, different people on laptops working on press, or negotiations – all the different things. Or coordinating spreadsheets for different donations.

Q: Sounds vibrant, and like there was momentum.

A: Yeah. There was a sense of collaboration and possibility. There were always multiple things going on, and it felt fluid in an exciting way. Immersion, I guess, is the word.

Q: What did grief look like in the space? Was that part of things for you?

A: We must have had a workshop or time for grief, but I don’t remember actually being there. I don;t remember a whole lot of grief. The moments that were more rough were more like.. Rough… were more conflictual and stressful than a space of grief.

I do feel like the night shifts, or the late night/early morning shifts for the safety team were really nice contemplative spaces. A nice way to start the day or end the day. I was on those pretty

regularly. We were just sitting on the Voter [hall] steps, looking at the encampment, the sleeping bags, and just chatting with whoever we were working with.

I remember, it must've been the morning we were about to take it down, and I was on the morning shift that day, and I remember waking up at 5 am and realizing 'oh, this things coming down,' and then taking a few pictures that were blurry, because it was 5 am. I was so 'in the rush of things' that I hadn;t captured many moments during it.

The other thing I'll add is that it was a weird balance with school work and the encampment, where the first few days I was fully in it and then I was like 'oh, maybe I should do some of my homework,' and so I left for like a full day and a half and I did a bunch of homework and then I came back and that was a weird balance.

On Saturday, when things went to shit, that was a moment when it was like 'okay, we have not been on the same page about what we're trying to do here.' There were some people helping lead the encampment who were like 'I'm not leaving this space,' and I think that quickly shifted into something that was less commitment and more amorphous. And I think that opened it up for more people to be involved, but I think also maybe… I wonder if it would've been good to push for more commitment from more people.

Q: Where did your commitment level – as far as how much time and energy you were spending towards the encampment – fall compared to others?

A: Middle to upper, the way I see things. For me it was the highest priority, but I was trying to maintain my classes and not fall behind too much on schoolwork, which was hard to do when there was something so much more interesting happening. In my memory, the encampment was a bigger thing for me on a personal level. My role in the encampment was relatively small, which is something I can forget because of how important it was to me, and how much time I put towards it.

Q: And it was important because of a shared purpose? Community? Flexing your organizing muscle?

A: Let me read what I wrote to myself, the *Signal* messages I sent to myself around that time.

Q: In what ways did it feel big for you? You said it was important to you, and to you in that moment. How?

A: Well, obviously because the genocide happening in Palestine. But also, this is hard for me to answer. I guess doing something that is collective and hopeful, especially at Middlebury, resisting… I feel like the encampment made a different spatial and temporal space, in a way that was really a community collectively doing what we feel like we could to influence the ongoing genocide, but also challenge the systems of domination that are furthering the genocide, the same systems that are doing so much bad.

Q: You mentioned “at Middlebury” specifically. Perhaps also you were challenging the norms of putting our lives in different cupboards, letting political consciousness sit in class and on your newsfeed, and then put away for the day when you go have your fun lunch at Proctor, do all your homework, and watch a movie. It seems like it’s really challenging living at the same time as atrocity and doing nothing about it.

A: Yeah. And that was definitely something I felt guilty about, leading up to the encampment in my time at Middlebury, and even my decision to come here.

There was such a sense of collectivity. Coming together and actually doing what we can. There was a huge diversity of efforts and projects. It felt more hopeful, less like we were limiting ourselves than some other [organizing spaces they’ve been a part of].

Q: What about it felt hopeful?

A: I remember on Saturday, once admin got back with a deal related to the five demands, which would be an agreement to take the encampment down, and then we talked about it for a few hours, in a groups that was a mix of the people from the start and some people who had stepped into roles, and coming to a decision – well, there was conflict. But coming to a decision to move forward and accept [the deal]. But I remember walking with a few other people and being like ‘wait, this isn’t what I want. This isn’t what the encampment was about, in the sense that these demands cannot get us what we need. But through the methods of the encampment there was more power getting closer to where we need to go than whatever toned-down words on paper Middlebury will say, or whatever academic working-groups that will start and maybe never finish. It was like ‘*that’s* not getting us where we need to go. But the methods of the encampment is where actually that possibility and power is.

And that’s when I realized I was never doing this because of those five demands, though I think a lot of people were. And they were very excited because it was like ‘we won, we got this thing,’ but I was like ‘those five demands are so insufficient.’ I felt like the encampment was getting even deeper.

There’s this article I read called “Why We Don’t Make Demands” which is saying that by making demands, you are saying that the existing institutions that exist have the ability to give you what you want. So if you make a demand to Middlebury that they end the relationship with the Israel Institute and that they start the process of divestment, you are saying that ‘Middlebury can get us what we need for ‘Palestinian Liberation.’ Or if you make a demand to the government to do this you’re saying ‘the government can get us what we want.’ But what I realized is that MIddlebury actually cannot give us what we need. Middlebury as an institution is fundamentally incapable of providing us with transformative or liberatory change. And through the methods of the encampment – through this thing which is messy and being created by us in a space of learning and disagreement and strategy – well, in an ideal world, the Middlebury that exists would be unrecognizable compared to the Middlebury that exists right now.

My understanding of how connected Middlebury is to economic exploitation and imperialism and all these different things, and that the world I'm fighting for isn't a world where its like Middlebury but a bit better because they accepted one Palestinian student, and because whatever tiny chunk of their endowment which is invested in war profiteering – that those stocks are owned by other companies instead – that's not the world I'm fighting for.

These structures cannot stay the same. And I feel like the encampment had so much hope and possibility because it was practicing the curation of other ways of relating and being.

Q: Right. So that feeling — that practicing of the way of being – have you felt that in spaces around [Middlebury] since [the encampment]?

A: Not really.

Q: Are there pieces of that which you feel you were able to bring and learn that you can see yourself plugging into spaces here?

A: That's a good question, but I feel like not that much. But I feel like it shouldn't be that way. There were some concrete lessons from the encampment, like more specific things. Like… a culture of urgency made decision making hard. Or the importance of transparency, or different things like that. Or about structuring different spaces, but in a much more specific way.

I feel sort of confused. Because something that felt so interesting and meaningful, but why can't I remember more of the specifics of what that was like or why it felt that way or what I took away from it. The heart of it was just doing things with other people. That's pretty cool.

Q: I wonder what we can learn from that miraculous break from the norm, and bring it into the future of Middlebury organizing?

A: I feel like what made the encampment unique was that it was a spatial and temporal break from the rest of the College. It was a distinct space which was separate.

Do you know the Truman show? His whole life is in this hemisphere dome thing. And I feel like that's what Middlebury's like. Inside the hemisphere of Middlebury these [certain] ways of thinking or valuing things are so hard to escape. Which is why I feel like ongoing organizing projects at Middlebury, because they're within that dome, and the rest of life going on the same, it's just an hour of time and then you have to go do your homework, go eat dinner. There's not the same space and time for it. And I feel like the encampment really disrupted that day to day rhythm, which I feel like made that a possibility.

But a thought or question I have is: Is it until you disrupt that day-to-day rhythm and routine which limits our imagination which, in my cynical view, keeps allowing the years of empire to roll

on, is it until we disrupt that routine that we can even think of or imagine different ways of doing things?

Q: It does seem like in our recent history at the college, this encampment as an instance of such a disruption meant an enormous amount to a lot of people. I don't know if disruption is the only and best model, but it seems like it happened…

A: Yeah. It did disrupt the day-to-day routine, but in a way that created an opportunity for other people to join and create this alternate space, but most people at Middlebury went about their day-to-day lives, and weren't that disrupted. I think it was relatively non-disruptive, except for being maybe an eyesore for the other 1500 people here.

Q: But what about disruption for people who already have political consciousness awakened – going about feeling wrong about the world but not knowing what to do about it – for them.

A: Yeah. I guess I just feel continually frustrated that frustration, and maybe desire to act, is oftentimes channeled into places that maybe aren't what someone was looking for.

In terms of the taking down of the encampment. And maybe I was operating in a different framework than other people, but moving explicitly oriented around demands and asking the board of trustees to do something in a way that's only calling into question these two details, as opposed to, I don't know, everything about how the world is, iIfeel like i have these images of the encampment – we had these onboarding tables around the outside that I was at for a while, especially over the first few days, where people would come up like 'oh, I want to get involved' and we're like ' okay, do you want to camp? What're you interested in doing?' You know, I have these vignettes of different people showing up or biking there or walking in, and it was so exciting how it went from 20 people putting up tents on Sunday morning to probably at least 100 tents, from the initial 30, and just so many people obviously found something meaningful and exciting – and people I didn't expect! – at the encampment. So it was frustrating and sad to think of , well, I don't think all those people experienced the full …. I hope people could realize a sense of their own agency and a sense of their own power, and the sense of their ability to imagine and demand other ways of doing things. And I don't know if people got enough of that to change future decisions.

I'm thinking of another organizing project I'm working on now, which is ending up taking the form of a more 'traditional' activism model, and feeling frustrated with that. I have this vision, but this group I'm helping with isn't providing for other people this sense of empowerment that I want it to.

Q: Right. What if every spring, for this new organization you're working with, everyone was like - we're gonna do tents! And break up with business as usual and engage the badness in the world and do something.

A: There has to be principles that you're organizing around. I think most people would probably disagree with me about demands and Middlebury. And I'm sort of self-conscious talking about it in a certain way. Because I feel sort of like an idealist, or like it centers ourselves and our lives and experiences in a certain way, and yeah, I think you absolutely need things you're organizing around and demanding. But I think it's a question of whether the demands we're asking from Middlebury so we can go about with our normal lives and just do our homework and do something over summer and work a job and retire and die? What I think of is something a group at Columbia, maybe their SJP said, is 'When we demand divestment, we are calling nothing more than the end of Columbia in its current form.' Because Columbia as an institution is fundamentally incompatible with divesting from war and war profiteering.

And these are the sorts of demands I'm thinking of. Because if I'm going to demand that Middlebury stop fueling genocide and war, then its not just a question of those 10 stocks of Caterpillar and Boeing thats a tiny chunk of their portfolio. It's a question of reorganizing all of Middenury and all of the world. So that sort of demand. It's not getting on your hands and knees and prostrating and begging 'please do this for us,' it's a demand we're going to put into action, it's a demand we're going to start working for. A demand that together we can bring into the world. But it isn't something that can happen if systems of who has power and who doesn't stay the same. But, I think one would be right in saying it's an idealist and unrealistic view that sacrifices the ability of short-term, beneficial compromises that can be made by existing institutions.

Q: Right. Are there lessons then that you took from the encampment about organizing at Middlebury that are more life-giving and effective?

A: Yeah. Before the encampment, I was advocating that we shouldn't even go to the green, because who's going to go to this thing? And then I was really surprised that people at Middlebury actually did seem to care. So a lesson from that was that people here actually do want to do things, and do want to act, but a lot of times just need some opportunity or possibility of what can even be done.

And a second takeaway is orienting around 'what do people want to do?' And allowing a range of projects and methods, where some people want to do this part and some people want to do this [other] part, and how there's space for all of that to work together.

Another lesson was about urgency culture. That was one of the things that made decision making very hard. If we have to make this decision by this time for this reason, that really shut down the ability to actually reach a decision people felt good about. I think of what Adrienne Maree Brown says. Her approach is that maybe if you spend 2 hours on the first item of an agenda meeting that was only supposed to take 5 minutes, you needed to do that. And by making time for that it will be so much easier to do the other pieces.

Another lesson, a lot of people got too exhausted or burned out. What may normally happen over a year happened in a week. People would step down from leadership roles like 2 days in. That's something that would be good to reflect more on.

With structure, the importance of transparency and awareness of who has access to information and who is in what conversations. For a lot of the encampment, that wasn't formalized. And there wasn't formal hierarchy or leadership, but there was still informal hierarchy or leadership. And a lot of people didn't have access to the full range of information, which I feel was very limiting for the ability to get invoked and find enough stake in the encampment as they could. I think that contributed to what I perceived to be the messy end of the encampment, which was a 6 hour meeting about the details of whether or not we were going to bring this thing to a vote.

That Saturday night, different people were grabbing the megaphone and making different appeals, and rounds of voting that weren't respected, and everybody frustrated and not even having clear guidelines about how we were making this decision, which led to the next day where nobody was happy. Okay, maybe some people were happy. Nobody seemed happy with the decision to take the encampment down, but still that was the thing we were doing.

Q: Did you make any friends?

A: Yeah, the encampment was so helpful for making friends and finding community, And led to a lot of the relationships I really value now.

One more thing, I had the feeling of actually doing something. A lot of activism boils down to 'sign this petition' or 'show up to this protest where we ask these people to do this thing' in a way that isn't empowering or feels not really like you're doing something.

It's funny to do an interview [about this]. There are so many moments and memories that can't be conveyed, it's so... inadequate.